DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 243 058 CG 017 430

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TITLE Social Anxiety and Reactions to Interpersonal Evaluative Information.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (91st, Anaheim, CA, August 26-30, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Anxiety; College Students; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Competence; Reliability; *Self Concept; Self Esteem; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); Social Behavior
IDENTIFIERS Shyness

ABSTRACT

Self-evaluation research reveals that individuals are differentially receptive to approval and disapproval from others. To examine how individuals respond to interpersonal evaluation, 96 male and female college students, chronically low or high in social anxiety (shyness), received evaluative information after a successful or unsuccessful outcome on a test of social insight. Subjects' affective and cognitive reactions to the test outcome and the evaluation valence were assessed using a modified version of the Differential Emotions Scale and a questionnaire on perceptions, attribution of responsibility, and locus of control. An analysis of the results provided strong support for self-consistency theory. Across several of the cognitive measures, subjects appeared more accepting of receiving from others evaluative information that was consistent with their self-evaluations. Specifically, low social anxiety subjects tended to accept favorable evaluations more than their high anxiety counterparts, whereas high social anxiety subjects tended to accept unfavorable evaluations more than their low anxiety counterparts. These results suggest that individuals' self-evaluations, garnered through previous interpersonal experiences, are very likely to be maintained through a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Individuals respond to interpersonal evaluation in a manner that tends to lend credence and support to their initial and ongoing self-conceptions. (BL)

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ED243058

Social Anxiety and Reactions to Interpersonal Evaluative Information

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Abstract

A study was designed to test self-esteem and self-consistency accounts of people's reactions to interpersonal evaluation. Following an objective success or failure task outcome, subjects chronically low and high in social anxiety received a more subjective evaluation. Cognitive measures (including accuracy ratings and attributions of responsibility for the evaluations) revealed very clear self-consistency effects. Low social anxious subjects tended to accept favorable evaluative information more than their high anxiety counterparts, whereas high social anxiety subjects tended to accept unfavorable information more than their low anxiety counterparts. Results are briefly discussed in terms of individuals' maintenance of these self-evaluations despite often challenging information.

The present research was designed to examine how individuals respond to interpersonal evaluation. A large body of research reveals that individuals are differentially receptive to approval and disapproval from others. Two relevant theories are concerned with the self-evaluation or self-concept of an individual, and how this in turn, determines one's reactions to evaluation from others (Jones, 1973). Studies in support of Self-consistency theory have found that individuals prefer information consistent with their own self-evaluations, and tend to reject inconsistent information (e.g., Deutsch & Solomon, 1959). Other studies, however, have found that individuals prefer favorable feedback from others, regardless of their self-evaluations (e.g., Sicoly & Ross, 1977). Because this finding suggests individuals seek to increase their self-esteem through the approval of others, this supports a variant of Self-esteem theory.

Recently, researchers have begun to examine the individual difference variable of social anxiety, or shyness, and the role it plays in interpersonal relations. Social anxiety is associated with systematic differences in self-evaluation. For instance, it has been suggested that persons high in social anxiety have a strong concern for social approval or disapproval. This concern may involve a lack of belief in their ability to perform adequately in social settings (Clark & Arkowitz, 1975), as well as a fear of disapproval. Thus, socially anxious individuals may be more motivated to avoid social disapproval than to seek approval in interpersonal situations (Arkin, 1981). Such a negative self-evaluation and concern for social evaluation, make social anxiety a reasonable area in which to test the self-esteem and self-consistency propositions.

In the present study, subjects chronically low and high in social

anxiety received evaluative information after a successful or unsuccessful outcome on a test of social insight. Self-esteem theory predictions state that subjects should accept favorable evaluations, and reject unfavorable evaluations, regardless of their own self-evaluation. However, according to this theory, socially anxious subjects might exhibit this tendency even more than nonanxious subjects because of their greater need for increased self=esteem. Self-consistency theory makes similar predictions for nonanxious subjects: specifically, these subjects should accept favorable evaluations, and reject unfavorable evaluations. On the other hand, socially anxious subjects should display a reverse tendency: they should reject favorable evaluations, and accept unfavorable evaluations (which are more consistent with their self-evaluations).

Method

Subjects and Design

Ninety-six male and female undergraduate students from an introductory psychology course were recruited by phone to participate in a study on social insight ability. Individuals scoring in the upper and lower third of a larger distribution of the social anxiety subscale of the Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975) were contacted.

The design also included two additional between subject variables (outcome valence, and evaluation valence), which were factorially combined with the social anxiety variable to yield eight experimental cells.

Procedure

An experimenter, blind to all conditions, presented subjects with the social insight test (which consisted of descriptions of ten interpersonal situations, each with four possible explanations or conclusions).

After completion of the test, subjects were to choose two of the situations, and provide a brief written explanation of it. (This was presented as part of a more subjective assessment of their social insight ability to be completed later, obstensibly by a clinical psychology specialist.) Immediately following the test, subjects were informed they had either succeeded (eight out of ten correct), or failed (two out of ten) the test.

After a brief delay, subjects received the feedback from the clinician. These evaluations contained several descriptors of social insight or sensitivity portrayed along seven-point rating scales. Subjects received forms in which the evaluator gave either generally favorable or generally unfavorable personality ratings. The evaluations concluded with a brief written description of the evaluator's overall impression of the subjects' social sensitivity that was consistent with the earlier descriptors.

Finally, subjects' affective as well as cognitive reactions to both the test outcome and the evaluation valence were assessed on separate questionnaires. A modified version of Izard's (1972) Differential Emotions Scale was used to assess affective responses. Several items related to each of six different emotions: joy, interest, and surprise (positive affects), and anger, fear, and distress (negative affects).

The other questionnaire included several measures of attribution of responsibility for the test outcome as well as for the evaluation, focussing on various internal and external sources. Several additional measures were included: perceived perceptiveness of the evaluator, perceived accuracy of the test outcome, perceived accuracy of the evaluation, and several manipulation checks. Upon completion of both questionnaires,

subjects were debriefed and dismissed.

Results

Manipulation Checks

High social anxious subjects reported more discomfort in actual social situations, $F(7,85)=54.42$, $p<.0001$, as well as in the present study, $F(7,85)=21.59$, $p<.0001$. The test outcome manipulation was successful; all subjects correctly recalled their score on the "social insight test." Finally, the favorable evaluations were rated significantly more favorable than the unfavorable evaluations, $F(7,85)=251.64$, $p<.0001$. Thus, each independent variable was realized successfully.

Cognitive Measures

Accuracy ratings. Analyses of variance revealed an interaction of social anxiety and test outcome for accuracy ratings of the test, $F(7,85)=7.52$, $p<.0007$, and an interaction of social anxiety and evaluation valence for accuracy ratings of the evaluation, $F(7,85)=15.79$, $p<.0001$. The pattern of means was the same for both interactions: low social anxiety subjects rated the favorable information as more accurate than their high social anxiety counterparts rated it, whereas high social anxiety subjects rated the unfavorable information as more accurate than their low anxiety counterparts (see Tables 1 and 2). These results provide clear support for the self-consistency viewpoint.

In addition to these interactions, subjects rated successful outcomes, $F(7,85)=66.30$, p .0001, and favorable evaluations, $F(7.85)=132.51$, $p<.0001$, as more accurate than failure outcomes and unfavorable evaluations.

A similar self-consistency pattern emerged for the measure of expectations of future evaluation. A marginally significant three-way

interaction, $F(7,85)=3,56$, $p<.06$, revealed that low social anxiety subjects were most certain of better future evaluation when they failed and received unflattering interpersonal assessments, whereas high social anxiety subjects seemed certain of less positive future evaluation whenever they received a flattering interpersonal appraisal (see Table 3). Additionally, highly anxious subjects generally expected less positive future evaluation, $F(7,85)=6.85$, $p<.01$, and subjects who received a favorable evaluation generally expected less positive future evaluation, $F(7,85)= 19.89$, $p<.0001$.

In a comparable way, the measure of perceptiveness of the evaluator revealed an interaction of social anxiety and evaluation, $F(7,85)= 11.62$, $p<.001$. When given favorable evaluations, low social anxious subjects rated the evaluator as more perceptive than their high anxiety counterparts, whereas when given unfavorable evaluations, high social anxious subjects rated the evaluator as more perceptive than their low anxiety counterparts (see Table 4).

Attributions. The results for external attributions (test difficulty and luck) are sparse, and somewhat ambiguous. Subjects in general, made few external attributions. The internal attribution measures (ability and effort) appeared to support previously discussed trends. An interaction of test and evaluation, $F(7,82)=29.62$, $p<.0001$, revealed that subjects assumed slightly more responsibility for favorable evaluations than for unfavorable evaluations, but only after a successful test outcome; after a failure outcome this pattern reversed, as subjects assumed slightly more responsibility for the unfavorable evaluation than for the favorable evaluation (see Table 5).

An interaction of social anxiety and evaluation valence, $F(7,82)=$

7.51, $p<.008$, revealed that all subjects assumed more responsibility for favorable than unfavorable evaluations; high social anxious subjects, however, exhibit this pattern to a lesser degree than low social anxious subjects (see Table 6).

Affect

Several significant main effects were uncovered for measures of positive affect, and are somewhat supportive of a self-esteem viewpoint. For example, subjects expressed more joy, $F(7,86)=33.42$, $p<.0001$, and interest, $F(7,86)=6.06$, $p<.02$, after receiving favorable evaluations than unfavorable evaluations. Somewhat less supportive of this viewpoint, however, is the significant interaction of test outcome and evaluation valence for the measure of joy, $F(7,86)=4.92$, $p<.03$. Subjects were less joyful after receiving unfavorable evaluations. However, subjects who failed the test and received the consistent evaluative information expressed somewhat more joy than those who succeeded and subsequently received the inconsistent evaluative information (see Table 7).

Analyses of variance revealed no significant interactions for the negative affective measures. Instead, several rather predictable main effects were uncovered. For example, subjects expressed more fear, $F(7,86)=4.39$, $p<.04$, and more distress, $F(7,86)=4.30$, $p<.04$, for failure test outcomes than for successful outcomes.

Discussion

The notion that self-evaluations affect reactions to interpersonal appraisal has implications for the study of individual differences in self-concept (e.g., social anxiety) as well as for the study of interpersonal relations in general. According to Mead (1934),

the self-concept is developed primarily through interpersonal encounters. Eventually, a rather stable self-concept emerges that guides the processing of future reflections from others. Esteem and consistency theories propose motivational constraints (enhancement or maintenance of self-concept) on self-concept. These constraints, in large part, determine reactions to and acceptance of evaluative information.

The present study provided strong support for self-consistency theory. Across several of the cognitive measures, subjects appeared more accepting of evaluative information from others that was consistent with their self-evaluations. Specifically, low social anxiety subjects tended to accept favorable evaluations more than their high anxiety counterparts, whereas high social anxiety subjects tended to accept unfavorable evaluations more than their low anxiety counterparts. These results suggest that individuals' self-evaluations, garnered through previous interpersonal experiences, are very likely to be maintained through a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Specifically, individuals respond to interpersonal evaluation in a manner that tends to lend credence and support to their initial and ongoing self-conceptions; information challenging one's initial conception tends to be rejected. Such a process has numerous implications for theory and practice in social and clinical psychology.

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Table 1

	Level of Social Anxiety	
Evaluation Valence	High	Low
Favorable	5.8	6.8
Unfavorable	3.6	2.5

Table 2

	Level of Social Anxiety	
Test Outcome	High	Low
Successful	6.5	8.1
Unsuccessfully	3.7	2.4

Table 3

	Level of Social Anxiety			
	High	Low	High	Low
Test Outcome	Successful		Unsuccessful	
Evaluation Valence				
Favorable	4.9	4.9	5.5	5.1
Unfavorable	5.8	5.5	6.0	6.7

Table 4

	Level of Social Anxiety	
Evaluation Valence	High	Low
Favorable	6.3	8.0
Unfavorable	4.6	3.7

Table 5

	Test Outcome	
Evaluation Valence	Successful	Unsuccessful
Favorable	15.1	5.0
Unfavorable	11.3	7.7

Table 6

Evaluation Valence	Level of Social Anxiety: High	Level of Social Anxiety: Low
Favorable	16.3	21.0
Unfavorable	13.0	12.2

Table 7

Evaluation Valence	Test Outcome: Successful	Test Outcome: Unsuccessful
Favorable	25.0	20.4
Unfavorable	13.3	15.2